

**GUNNISON BASIN DATA ANALYSIS UNIT A-23**

**ANTELOPE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**GAME MANAGEMENT UNITS 551, 66 AND 67**

**DIVISION OF WILDLIFE**

**300 W. NEW YORK AVE.**

**GUNNISON, CO**

**JANUARY, 2001**

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DAU A-23

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## DATA ANALYSIS UNIT PLAN

### Executive Summary

**DAU:** A-23 Gunnison Basin Antelope

**Game Management Units:** 551, 66 and 67

**Current Population Estimate:** 358      **Average Sex Ratio:** 27 Bucks:100 Does

**Current Population Objective:** 650      **Current Sex Objective:** 40:100

**New Population Objective:** 450      **New Sex Ratio Objective:** 40:100

**Percent Change:** 23% Decrease

#### SUMMARY OF MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

The primary process used by the CDOW to gather public input to help select preferred alternatives for this DAU Plan was the Gunnison Citizen Task Force Committee (CTF). The CTF consisted of 18 members representing local businesses, sportspersons, environmental groups, livestock operators, outfitters, general public, federal land-use agencies and local government entities. The CTF had 9 meetings from January, 1998 through March, 1999 and 2 additional meetings in March and April, 2000. Additional information on the CTF process is included in Appendix A. Recommendations from the Gunnison Habitat Partnership Committee and CDOW personnel were also considered to select preferred alternatives.

The preferred alternative for population size is to manage the antelope population in the DAU at 450 animals. The antelope population has been declining since 1989 and the current estimated antelope population is about 100 animals below this objective. No doe licenses will be issued until the population reaches the objective level.

The preferred alternative for the herd composition objective (buck:doe ratio) is maintain the current objective of 40 bucks:100 does. A complete sex ratio count has not been conducted in the DAU since 1995 but, the average observed ratio from 1990 to 1995 is 27 bucks:100 does. Only a few limited buck licenses will continue to be issued to allow the ratio to increase towards the objective.

A public meeting was held in Gunnison on November 20, 2000 to present the draft DAU Plans and to receive input on the preferred alternatives. Fifty six (56) people signed the sign-in sheet at the meeting. Also in attendance, were Wildlife Commissioners Mark LeValley and Bob Shoemaker plus staff and area CDOW personnel. A comment form was handed out at the meeting. The deadline for returning comment forms was December 20, 2000.

A total of 73 comment forms and letters were returned. Of the respondents that addressed the preferred alternatives for A-23, 83% (50 of 60) supported the preferred alternative for population size and 100% (59 of 59) supported the preferred alternative for buck:doe ratio. Included in the respondents which supported both of the preferred alternatives, were letters from the Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association, Inc. and the Gunnison BLM.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY DAU A-23 (continued)**

Comments by opponents for the population size alternative included "population should be higher" and "population too low".

**SIGNIFICANT ISSUES**

Managing big game and domestic livestock numbers to improve and maintain healthy range conditions was a significant issue discussed by all stakeholders during the planning stages of this DAU Plan. All parties agree that habitat monitoring and evaluation should be an important component of the plan and big game population levels should be managed at the carrying capacity of the habitat. The CDOW is committed to work with USFS and BLM personnel to increase and improve habitat monitoring. It is recommended that an annual status review occur among interested parties to discuss information on range conditions, forage production and previous climatic and winter conditions. The review should occur in early spring and prior to when area DOW personnel submit limited license recommendations.

A concern regarding competition between antelope and Gunnison sage grouse was discussed but, no conclusions were made.

## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

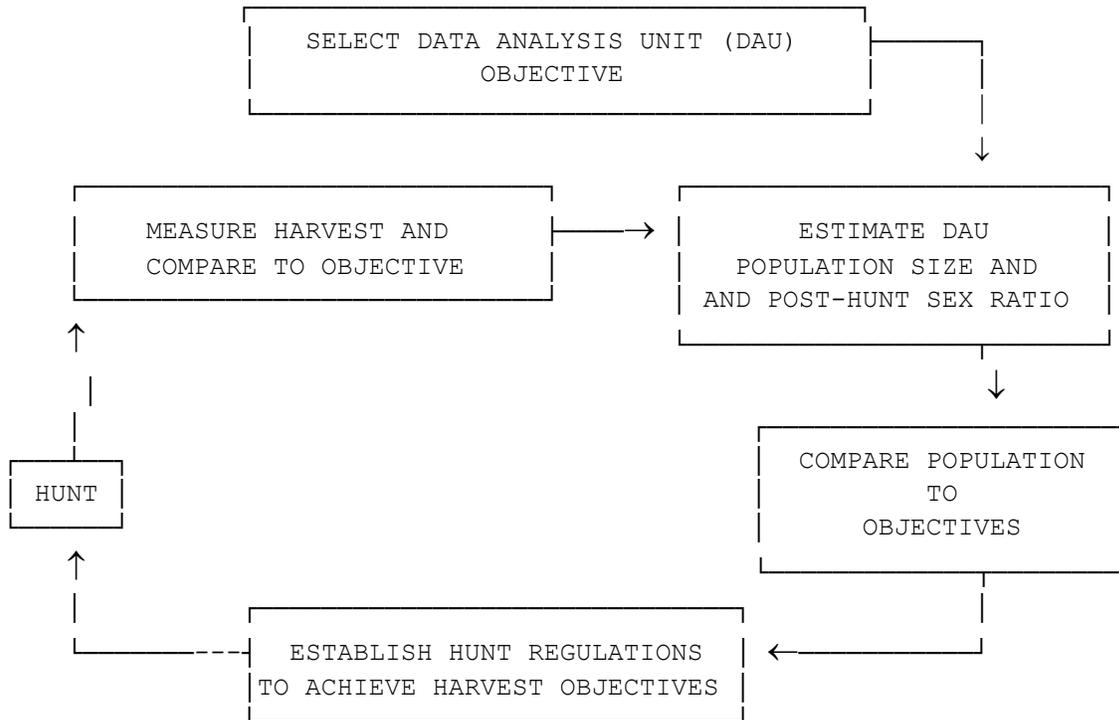
Big game seasons were historically set on the basis of tradition or by the vagaries of politics. Often, the seasons that resulted were not related to herd levels, status of the habitat or even balanced by the interests of affected publics. Hunters, the USDA Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, agricultural producers, guides and outfitters, and other business people all share a stake in the management of Colorado's big game herds. By statute, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) is accountable to manage every species of wildlife for the benefit of all Colorado residents and visitors to the State. To insure that public needs are met, it is imperative that DOW maintain big game herds at population levels agreed upon in a public review process and approved by the Wildlife Commission.

For convenience, populations of big game ungulates are typically described on the basis of a herd unit occupying a specific geographic area. DOW refers to such an area as a Data Analysis Unit (DAU). Normally each DAU is composed of several game management units (GMUs) that divide the DAU into subunits designed to manage hunter distribution. The boundaries of a given DAU should encompass the area where most of the herd carries out breeding activities, spends the winter, gives birth and raises their young, with minimal ingress of animals from surrounding GMUs, or egress of resident animals.

In recent years, DOW has adopted a five-year objective setting process based on the preparation of a DAU Plan. The public is involved in determining population goals through public meetings sponsored by DOW, along with the opportunity to submit comments directly to the Colorado Wildlife Commission. Interested parties are invited to give their ideas on how many animals to have in the population, and help decide the most desirable composition (*i.e.*, ratio of males, females and young) for a particular herd. These numbers are referred to respectively as the DAU population and composition objectives. DOW consults federal land management agencies to help determine the amount of habitat suitable for supporting the big game species covered by the plan, and to identify any problem areas within the habitat. Local committees of the Habitat Partnership Program (HPP) also play a significant role in the DAU Planning process. This program brings together representatives from the Bureau of Land Management, the USDA Forest Service, DOW, stock growers and hunting interests into working groups. HPP participation in DAU planning insures that private land habitat issues are considered when setting DAU objectives, that conflict areas are identified and solution strategies are appropriate.

The DAU plan summarizes all the important management data and issues in one utilitarian planning document. Once all the issues regarding the management of a given species have been identified, and the biological capabilities determined, alternative solutions are developed. An appropriate balance between public desires, issues and capabilities is sought, leading to the selection of a preferred alternative.

After the Wildlife Commission reviews and approves a DAU plan, the population and composition objectives become management targets that drive the annual permit setting process. Management by objective is a process based on an annual cycle of information collection, analysis, and decision-making that culminates each year in a hunting season (see diagram below).



The population objective drives the most important decision in the annual big game season setting process □ how many animals need to be harvested to meet the population objective. If, for example, the herd is under objective, this will call for relatively few, if any, antlerless licenses. On the other hand, if the herd is over objective, the number of licenses will need to be liberalized. The cyclic objective setting approach focuses on the collection and analysis of information, and serves to keep decision makers working toward a specific goal.

In instances where significant conflicts occur with agricultural interests in the management of a particular species, local HPP committees attempt to address these problems. Individual HPP Committees are responsible for developing a Distribution Management Plan (DMP), which establishes a framework for alleviating big game conflicts on public and private lands through habitat enhancements and direct distribution techniques, such as specialized hunts. Whereas the DAU plan addresses the overriding management strategy, the DMP focuses on management actions that may reach down to the level of individual ranches. To accomplish objectives outlined in the DMP, committees are allocated money at a rate of 5% of the annual three-year average license revenues for deer, elk and antelope licenses in their locality. HPP is also authorized to compensate landowners for actual damage to fence and forage caused by big game.

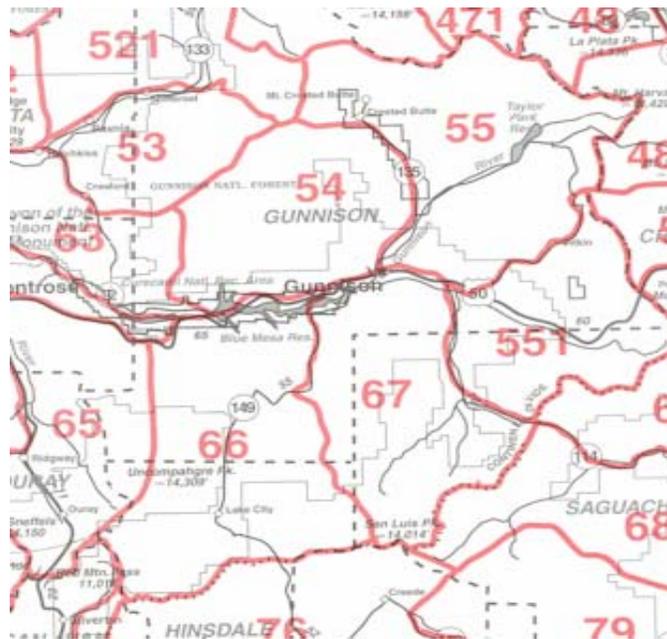
Tradition and politics still play a role in the season setting process. But hopefully this new approach does a much better job of analyzing the desires of various publics and then setting objectives, helping to ensure that big game species are managed properly.

## DESCRIPTION OF DATA ANALYSIS UNIT

### LOCATION

Data Analysis Unit (DAU) A-23 is located in the south central portion of southwest Colorado in Gunnison, Saguache and Hinsdale counties. Previously the DAU A -23 contained only Game Management Unit (GMU) 551 but, now DAU A-38 (GMU's 66 and 67) is being included. The combined DAU is bound on the north by Morrow Point and Blue Mesa Reservoirs, US Highway 50 and Quartz Creek; on the east and south by the Continental Divide; and on the west by the Big Blue Creek-Little Cimarron River Divide and Big Blue Creek.

**Figure 1. DAU A-23 Map**



### CLIMATE AND VEGETATION

The antelope range in the DAU is characteristic of lower elevation habitats within a high mountain valley. Elevations range from about 7700 to 9000 feet in elevation. Vegetation types range from irrigated hay meadows in the lower elevation bottom areas to aspen communities. The dominant vegetative type is a sagebrush community with limited amounts of serviceberry, mountain mahogany and bitterbrush found in some areas. The area receives an annual precipitation of only 10-14 inches.

### LAND STATUS

The occupied antelope range in the DAU is about 85% public land, mostly BLM. The management emphasis on the public land is big game winter range and

livestock grazing allotments. Fifteen percent (15%) of the antelope range is private land which is primarily used for hay production and livestock grazing.

## **HABITAT RESOURCES**

The DAU contain about 2220 square miles of which only 600 square miles could be considered suitable antelope range. The majority of the present antelope population in the DAU occupies about 315 square miles.

Wildlife Resource Information System (WRIS) mapping has not been completed for the entire Gunnison Basin antelope DAU. Therefore, acreage estimates for year-long, winter and severe winter ranges on private and public lands are not available at this time.

The concern about condition of wildlife seasonal ranges, especially winter ranges, is significant and has been mentioned by several individuals. Dr. Roy Roath with the range science department at Colorado State University offers the following observations. The wildlife winter range is unable to support the current numbers of wildlife without substantial risk to the populations. The shrub component clearly indicates that transitional and winter ranges are being over-browsed. Damage to resources can result in long-term loss of the habitat's ability to support grazing animals.

Bureau of Land Management personnel offered the following comments. Numbers of big game in excess of herd objectives from 1987 to 1996 have contributed to the degraded vegetation conditions on critical winter range. The intensity and frequency of big game use has resulted in plant communities which cannot support current populations without continued degradation. Because of this, the carrying capacity has been greatly reduced. Both elk and deer need to be reduced to improve the winter and transition ranges.

The Gunnison Basin Habitat Assessment Project (GHAP) reported on habitat conditions only in extreme eastern portion of the DAU in GMU 551. A report released in January 1999 concluded: "Winter range in the study area is not in good shape. The vegetation is dominated by over-used and decadent big sage plants that have stunted growth and low production. This condition has resulted from a long time of over use from grazing herbivores. The key long-term risk, as we see it, is continued and/or accelerated damage to range resources." The GHAP report further states that they do not believe it is wise to plan for supplemental feeding programs to circumvent difficult winters.

## **Carrying Capacity**

Decision makers must take carrying capacity into account when determining optimum size at which to maintain a herd. As any population of animals expands in a finite habitat, it eventually reaches a maximum sustainable level. That level for ungulates is usually governed by availability of food resources. Typically, survival and reproductive rates decline as the

population approaches carrying capacity, until no further population growth is possible. Fewer resources are available to individuals in the population at this point due to the demands of increased numbers of animals. In most situations carrying capacity is not static, however, but fluctuates from year to year based on factors such as forage production, forage availability, and competition with other species. Herbivore populations respond to these fluctuations in carrying capacity, which in turn affects predator populations. Wildlife managers recognize that it is often possible to increase harvest over the long term and reduce the possibility of large die-offs due to severe winters by managing a population at some level well below carrying capacity of the habitat. The increased production that results from individuals being on a higher plane of nutrition more than compensates for the reduced population size. Individual animals are usually more healthy and robust. Other species may also benefit from increased availability of forage and cover.

## **HERD MANAGEMENT HISTORY**

### **Post-Hunt Population Size**

The antelope population in the DAU was started in GMU 551 from transplants done south of Doyleville in 1970 and 1988 and in Home Gulch in 1988. Another transplant was made in Needle Creek in 1994. In GMU 67, an antelope transplant was done in Cochetopa Park in 1981, 1983 and 1988. Also in GMU 67, a transplant was done in Chance Gulch in 1989. Antelope released in Chance Gulch also expanded to the west into GMU 66.

Due to continued low doe:fawn ratios and poor fawn survival, antelope populations in the DAU have never significantly increased. The post-hunt population estimate was 716 in 1989 and has continued to decrease to 358 in 1999.

### **Disclaimer**

Estimating population numbers of wild animals over large geographic areas is not an exact science. Whenever attempts have been made to account for a known number of animals in large fenced enclosures, investigators have consistently failed to see every animal. In some cases, less than 50% of the animals can be observed and counted. High-tech methods using remote sensing have also met with very limited success. Most population estimates derived using computer model simulations involve estimations of sex ratio at birth, survival rates, wounding loss and annual production. These simulations are then adjusted to align on measured post-hunt age and sex ratio classification counts, and in some cases density estimates derived from line-transect or quadrat surveys. DOW recognizes population estimation as a serious limitation in our management efforts and attempts to minimize this problem by using the latest technology and inventory methodology available. As better information has been obtained

on survival rates, wounding loss, fetal sex ratios and density estimates, and whenever new modeling techniques and programs have emerged, these have been assimilated into the process for population estimates. These changes may result in significant differences in the population size estimate and make new management strategies more appropriate. It is recommended that the population estimates presented in this document not be viewed as an exact representation of the number of animals in the DAU; instead, their utility is in helping to evaluate population trends over time.

### **Post-Hunt Herd Composition**

Prior to 1990, antelope sex ratio counts were only conducted in GMU 551. From 1985 to 1989 the average fawn:doe ratio is 38:100 and the average buck:doe ratio is 25:100. In the entire DAU the average fawn:doe ratio from 1990 to 1995 is 25 fawns per 100 does and average buck:doe ratio is 27:100 (Table 1). Complete sex ratio counts have not been conducted in the DAU since 1995.

### **Harvest**

From 1980 through 1995 the buck harvest in the DAU fluctuated from none in some years to a high of 28 in 1990. The average annual buck over the past 4 years (1996-1999) is 13 (Table 2). There has been no doe harvest in the DAU.

### **Hunting Pressure**

The number of hunters in the DAU from 1980 to 1995 have fluctuated from 0 to a high of 48 in 1990. The average number of hunters from 1996 through 1999 is 20 (Table 2).

**Table 1. DAU A-23 Age and Sex Ratios, 1990-1995.**

Year	Count Type	Parameter	Yrlg. M /100 F	2-Yr. M /100 F	Adult M /100 F	Total M /100 F	Young /100F
1990	PRE	Estimate	0	0	21.6	21.6	18.4
1991	PRE	Estimate	0	0	13.5	13.5	32.7
1992	PRE	Estimate	0	0	20.4	20.4	27.1
1993	PRE	Estimate	5.0	11.6	26.1	42.7	16.0
1994	PRE	Estimate	0	14.7	25.4	40.0	28.0
1995	PRE	Estimate	0	3.4	22.6	26.0	26.7

**Table 2. DAU A-23 Antelope Harvest, Hunters and Percent Success, 1984-99.**

Year	Total Males	Total Females	Total Young	Total Harvest	Total Hunters	Per. Suc.	Total Rec. Days
1980	9	0	0	9	9	100	12
1981	8	0	0	8	10	80	16
1982	9	0	0	9	10	90	14
1983	9	0	0	9	9	100	14
1984	7	0	0	7	29	14	132
1985	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1986	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1987	0	0	0	0	3	0	6
1988	0	0	0	0	3	0	20
1989	15	0	0	15	38	40	96
1990	28	0	0	28	48	58	162
1991	9	0	0	9	18	50	88
1992	5	0	0	5	16	31	43
1993	13	0	0	13	22	59	72
1994	4	0	0	4	14	29	160
1995	7	0	0	7	17	41	97
1996	12	0	0	12	24	50	70
1997	12	0	0	12	16	75	59
1998	11	0	0	11	14	79	79
1999	16	0	0	16	26	62	83
Totals	174	0	0	174	326	53	1223

## **CURRENT HERD MANAGEMENT STATUS**

The current long-term population objective for both of the old DAU's (A-23 and A-38) combined is 650 antelope. The combined 1999 post-hunt population estimate is 358 antelope.

The current long-term post-hunt sex ratio objective for both old DAU's is 40 bucks per 100 does. The average ratio for both DAU's from 1990 to 1995 is 27:100.

## **MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

### **Division of Wildlife Issues and Concerns**

- **Limited Winter Range** - Only a limited amount of habitat is available to support deer, elk and pronghorn during the winter. More and more winter habitat is converted to housing and associated development every year. In severe winters deer become concentrated in the floor of the valley on a few south facing or wind swept slopes. Competition for food is intense and this results in higher than normal winter mortality.
- **Habitat Condition** - In addition to the loss of habitat to human development, overall habitat condition in A-23 may have declined over the last several decades. Sagebrush stands are tending to become more decadent and forbs are being lost in the understory. Long-term soil erosion has caused fertility to decline, and some riparian systems may be deteriorating. The combined effects of these are bound to be having some effect on big game.
- **Winter Feeding of Big Game** - Severe winter weather conditions occasionally require that big game animals, including deer be supplied supplemental feed in order to prevent game damage, control distribution of animals and reduce winter mortality. However, winter feeding has drawbacks in the form of concentration of animals, habituation of animals to humans, localized damage to winter ranges and the increased potential for disease outbreaks. Also, winter feeding is expensive both in the cost of supplemental feed and the increased demands for manpower and equipment. The DOW has a feeding policy that establishes criteria that determine where and when feeding will occur, but it is incumbent on the DOW to try and keep big game populations below the carrying capacity of the habitat to minimize the frequency of winter feeding events. The winter feeding policy will be used to determine when and if supplemental feeding will occur in DAU A-23.

## **Public Issues and Concerns**

The public has expressed an interest in increasing the level of local participation in the process of making decisions influencing wildlife population objectives as well as regulations controlling types of hunting seasons and hunter participation. During the rewrite of the DAU plans for the Gunnison Basin, a new process for soliciting public input was tested by CDOW. Citizen Task Force (CTF), a process developed in New York State was selected as a result of the successful track record that had been developed in using this process to develop recommendations on specific management strategies. Public meetings were held in Lake City and Gunnison in December of 1997 to identify issues and allow people to define their "stake" or interest in the process. Following in January, representatives of the Division of Wildlife, Gunnison Basin Habitat Partnership Program committee, Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management met to nominate persons to serve on the CTF. Eighteen people were selected to represent a variety of interests including business interests, sportspeople, the environmental community, ranchers, outfitters, the general public and government entities.

Several wildlife/livestock issues have been identified and strategies representing potential solutions for each issue are addressed in the Gunnison Basin Big Game Distribution Management Plan (DMP) (November, 1992). Other issues and concerns were identified by the Gunnison Citizen Task Force and Gunnison Habitat Partnership committee members, members of the public, members of Gunnison Citizen's Wildlife Association and CDOW personnel. These issues and concerns are addressed in this DAU plan.

## **Land Management Agencies Issues and Concerns**

Land management agency personnel have expressed concerns that present population levels of elk are too large for the available habitat.

- Shrub communities have been over utilized and are in poor condition in some areas.
- Riparian vegetation has also been damaged in some areas.
- High elk populations may be a negative influence on deer and Gunnison sage grouse populations.

## **ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

The main purpose of this DAU plan is to determine the long-term post-hunt population and herd composition (bucks:100 does) objectives. Listed below are a few of the many possible alternatives that could be considered to accomplish these objectives.

### **POPULATION SIZE**

1. DECREASE - 450 Antelope (30% Decrease)

13

The 1999 post-hunt population in the DAU is currently about 100 antelope below this alternative. A few limited buck licenses will continue to be issued and the population will be allowed to increase to the objective before doe harvested is implemented.

Additional habitat improvement projects would not be essential. There wouldn't be any significant fiscal impacts.

2. HOLD - 650 Antelope (Status Quo)

The current antelope population is about 290 animals below this population level. The present management strategy, with a few limited buck licenses, will be continued to allow the population to increase. If the population ever reaches this alternative level, sufficient limited doe licenses will be issued to maintain the desired population level.

Additional habitat improvement projects could be beneficial in some key winter areas. There would no significant increases in game damage or significant fiscal impacts to local economies.

#### **HERD COMPOSITION (BUCK:DOE RATIO)**

1. DECREASE - 30 Bucks:100 Does

To maintain a lower buck:doe ratio may provide some additional buck hunting opportunity in the DAU. However, it would also provide fewer older age class bucks in the population.

This alternative wouldn't require additional habitat improvement projects and there wouldn't be any significant fiscal impacts.

2. HOLD - 40 Bucks:100 Does (Status Quo)

This alternative wouldn't require any changes in the current hunting season structure. A few limited buck licenses will continue to be issued each year. This should allow the buck:doe ratio to continue to improve. If recruitment into the population improves and the population starts to increase, more buck licenses may be issued in the future.

This alternative wouldn't require additional habitat improvement projects and there wouldn't be any fiscal impacts.

## **ALTERNATIVE SELECTION**

### **PREFERED ALTERNATIVES**

The listed preferred alternatives for population size and herd composition were selected after receiving recommendations from the Gunnison Citizen Task Force committee (CTF), the Gunnison Habitat Partnership Committee (GHPC) and Division of Wildlife personnel. The alternatives shall be in effect for a period of 10 years or until amended.

### **POPULATION SIZE**

2. DECREASE - 450 Antelope (30% Decrease)

This preferred alternative concurs with the CTF and CDOW personnel recommendations. The GHPC recommended a population objective of 650.

### **HERD COMPOSITION (BUCK:DOE RATIO)**

2. HOLD - 40 Bucks:100 Does (Status Quo)

This preferred alternative concurs with the CTF, the GHPC and CDOW personnel recommendations.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

1. Limited buck licenses will continue to be issued annually in each of the 3 GMUs in the DAU. Whenever the buck:doe ratio objective is attained, additional buck licenses will be authorized to maintain the desired ratio.
2. If the antelope population reaches the objective level, limited doe licenses will be authorized to manage the population at the objective level.
3. Managing the antelope population at a lower level should improve habitat conditions to sustain the population for a long period.
4. Habitat and range quality will regularly be monitored and evaluated to determine if population objective levels need to be adjusted.

**APPENDIX A****PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT in HERD UNIT PLANNING for GUNNISON BASIN, COLORADO**

Data Analysis Unit (DAU) or herd unit plans are the cornerstone of big game management in Colorado. They are viewed by the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) as the equivalent of a "contract" with the local community and local representatives of statewide user groups for the approximate size of big game populations for the area defined in the plan. The Gunnison Basin DAU plans were written in 1993 and covered the years 1994-98. The plans were due to be updated in 1998 for the years 1999-2003. Big game DAU Plans are now written to cover a 10-year period.

One of the major outcomes of the Big Game License Allocation Project, a statewide project sponsored by the Division of Wildlife in 1997 and 1998, has been a declaration that the public wants to increase/improve the level of local participation in the process of making wildlife recommendations to the Wildlife Commission.

The Human Dimensions (HD) section was formed as part of the DOW reorganization in mid 1996. One task of this section was to improve the public involvement portion of DAU planning. Accordingly, the HD section recommended that a process proven successful as a means to develop recommendations on specific management strategies in New York State, known as Citizen's Task Force (CTF) planning, be tried in the Gunnison Basin.

Public meetings were held in Lake City and Gunnison on December 16 and 17, 1997 where the CTF process was described, and issues were identified, ranked and recorded using a nominal group technique. People identified their "stake" or interest in the process, and several people volunteered to serve as CTF members.

In January 1998, representatives of the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW), Gunnison Basin Habitat Partnership Program committee (HPP), United States Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) met to nominate persons to serve on the CTF. Twenty-five people were contacted to determine if they would serve on the committee; 17 accepted the invitation. There were 3 members to represent business interests, 2 to represent sportspersons, 2 to represent the environmental community, 2 to represent ranchers, 2 to represent outfitters, 3 to represent the general public and 3 to represent other agencies/entities of government. A third sportsman was added at the request of a sportsman's group, bringing the total to 18.

The CTF had their first meeting January 13, 1998 in Gunnison. John Gray, public involvement coordinator for the DOW, facilitated the first 9 CTF meetings and John Smeltzer, Human Dimensions Supervisor, facilitated the last 2 meeting. At the first meeting, John Gray explained the task for the CTF was to develop recommendations to the Colorado Wildlife Commission on post-season herd size and post-season sex ratio (bulls per 100 cows or bucks per 100 does) for each of the 7 DAUs in the Gunnison Basin: three elk, three deer and one pronghorn. The CTF was charged with obtaining input from the variety of interest groups, trying to balance those interests and arriving at a recommendation on herd size and composition that "everyone can live with". Gray also explained that the process was open to the public and that consensus

would be sought for each recommendation. During each meeting, the public in the audience (which varied from 4 to over 100 persons) was allowed to ask questions of speakers or make statements of fact or opinion. However, only

## **APPENDIX A (continued)**

those CTF members present were allowed to vote on the issues to be decided.

The initial plan was to have just 3 meetings with CTF members to develop the recommendations. The first meeting was to present data/information, the second meeting to discuss and suggest alternatives, and the third meeting to select the alternatives that would become the DAU recommendations. The whole process was scheduled to be complete by April 1998. However, a few things occurred independently of the CTF process that had a major impact on the schedule: two lawsuits and a habitat study.

In January 1998 the Wildlife Commission (WC) passed regulations that totally limited all elk hunting in Game Management Units (GMUs) 66 and 67 on the south side of the Gunnison Basin. At the same meeting, the WC opened 48 GMU's in western Colorado to over-the-counter either sex elk hunting for 1998, including GMU's 54, 55 and 551, the north and east sides of the Gunnison Basin. These two decisions precipitated lawsuits that affected the local political climate in which the CTF operated.

During the spring of 1998, the Gunnison Basin HPP committee commissioned a study team, headed by Dr. Roy Roath, extension Range Specialist from Colorado State University, to conduct a habitat assessment in the Gunnison Basin. At the April 13, 1998 CTF meeting, Dr. Roath briefed the CTF on the study proposal and several HPP members urged the CTF to put their process on hold until the habitat report was finished. The CTF agreed to suspend further meetings until December 1998 at which time they would consider the condition/capacity information from the habitat study team.

During spring and summer 1998, the DOW lost two court cases. The group opposing the over-the-counter either-sex elk licenses in GMUs 54, 55 and 551 won their case and the DOW had to scramble to get cow licenses approved by the Wildlife Commission for the fall hunts. The group opposed to the limitations in GMUs 66 and 67 won their case and the two units were once again open to unlimited, over-the-counter bull licenses.

During all this commotion, the CTF tried to keep focused on their task of developing recommendations for population size and sex ratios. They met once during the summer of 1998 and then started meeting regularly again in December 1998. In total, the CTF met 9 times with the last meeting in March 1999. All recommendations except the population size for the three deer DAUs were reached by consensus. Decisions on deer numbers were reached by 9-4 majority vote.

The recommendations of the Gunnison Basin CTF were presented to the Wildlife Commission at their May 1999 meeting in Gunnison. CTF members understood that their recommendations will be considered along with the recommendations from the Gunnison Basin HPP committee, DOW staff, the federal agencies and local government.

